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**THE HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS OF U.S. GRAND STRATEGY**

By

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### **Abstract**

In order to effectively write grand strategy for the twenty first century it is important to understand how “American exceptionalism” among other influences affects U.S. grand strategy. The ideological constant of “American exceptionalism” has historically influenced and at times constrained U.S. grand strategy. “American exceptionalism” continues to influence America’s grand strategy in the present and is likely to do so in the future. A historical analysis is used to analyze the historical roots of exceptionalism in the United States starting with the Puritans and other thinkers of the time. The analysis continues to look at how “American exceptionalism” has evolved with America to include its influence on the quest for independence and the early post revolution grand strategies. This idea of “American exceptionalism” started to find itself in conflict with the competing ideologies of political idealism and the principles of political realism. This conflict and its effect on grand strategy continue to exist even in the context of today’s grand strategy as U.S. grand strategy struggles with the idea of being a non interfering example to other nations and the need to use the spread of American ideas as a way to mask the realist tendencies of what America perceives as its own interests of self security. “American exceptionalism” continued to influence and at times constrained the grand strategy of the United States throughout different administrations as the country and its grand strategy continued to evolve. This trend of the continuing influence of “American exceptionalism” continues today in regards to America’s grand strategy.



## **Section 1: Introduction/Thesis**

In order for airmen to help write grand strategy for the twenty first century they must first recognize the many influences that affect grand strategy. Political scientists Colonel Dennis Drew and Dr. Donald Snow state that “Understanding strategy requires a more sophisticated understanding of the political environment in which strategy is made and carried out.”<sup>1</sup> Historically, American political ideology has played a prominent role in the shaping of U.S. grand strategy. The ideological constant of “American exceptionalism” has shaped and constrained U.S. grand strategy throughout the history of America. This “American exceptionalism” has manifested itself in the form of a political idealism that has competed with principles of political realism. This ideological constant will continue to shape and constrain U.S. grand strategy in the future. To succeed in devising grand strategy for the twenty- first century, it is important to understand how “American exceptionalism” has affected American grand strategy in the past.

This paper will begin by defining grand strategy and discussing how it is made. According to Drew and Snow, several dimensions make up grand strategy, but for present purposes the most important is the political dimension. Following that, the paper will look at “American exceptionalism” in the historical context of grand strategy. “American exceptionalism” will be defined and will discuss why it is considered what political scientist Samuel P. Huntington called an “ideological constant”<sup>2</sup> in his book *The Soldier and the State*.

Three common types of exceptionalism, demographic, political, and spiritual will be briefly explored. After establishing what grand strategy and “American exceptionalism” are the paper will explore the roots of exceptionalism in America as well as look at a few historical periods



where exceptionalism has played a prominent role in grand strategy. It is not possible to examine all of American history and the relationship of grand strategy and exceptionalism within the scope of this paper. Therefore this paper will address certain periods of American history that best illustrate how “American exceptionalism” has influenced grand strategy in the past and continues to do so in the present. After examining “American exceptionalism” in history the paper will look at “American exceptionalism” in current grand strategy. The last section of the paper will be a discussion of “American exceptionalism” and the future of grand strategy.

## **Section 2: What is grand strategy and how to make grand strategy?**

In *Making Twenty-First-Century Strategy*, Drew and Snow provide a complete overview of grand strategy starting with framing the problem to the different dimensions of grand strategy. They also discuss influences on grand strategy as well as the dilemmas of formulating grand strategy. Before beginning any worthwhile discussion on strategy it is important to understand the fundamental principles of the subject. According to Drew and Snow, strategy in its most fundamental sense is defined as “a plan of action that organizes efforts to achieve an objective.”<sup>3</sup> At first this may seem to be a somewhat simplistic definition, but the authors do go on to clarify that it is more accurate to consider strategy as a decision making process.<sup>4</sup> Strategy exists on different levels. “Grand” strategy, in this paper, refers to strategy on the broader level concerned mainly with broad and long term issues as they relate to national objectives, sometimes known as national policy.<sup>5</sup> These grand strategic or national objectives are achieved using different instruments of power. Again according to Drew and Snow, “Grand national strategy can be defined as the art of coordinating the development and use of the instruments of national power to achieve national security objectives.”<sup>6</sup>

After defining grand strategy the making of grand strategy can be discussed. As previously stated grand strategy includes the development and use of all the instruments of power. They are most often used together. These instruments of power include, but are not limited to, military, diplomatic/political, economic, and informational. Collectively they are often referred to as “the DIME.” These instruments of power can arguably be set into two broader categories, military and political. For the purpose of this paper the influence and possible constraint that “American exceptionalism” has on the political dimensions of grand strategy is most pertinent. It is important, however, to recognize that this does not exclude the military category. The military category can also reflect the influence of exceptionalism, and is in many cases the manifestation or continuation of the political strategy.

When constructing grand strategy there are many influences such as cultural, society, economics, and international politics. Factors such as what the national objectives are, what the priorities should be, and how they should be achieved<sup>7</sup> also influence the making of grand strategy. All of these factors hold the potential to display individual or even national lenses through which one views grand strategy. It may be argued that one of these lenses or “ideological constants” is in fact “American exceptionalism”. This idea of “American exceptionalism” is what Drew and Snow would consider a political tradition.<sup>8</sup> An example of this would be the idea that the American ideals of democracy and liberalism are in fact universal and apply to everyone. It is important to recognize that grand strategy is not formulated in a vacuum. There are many factors that influence the formulation of grand strategy.

### **Section 3: “American exceptionalism” in the historical context of U.S. grand strategy**

In this paper “American exceptionalism” has been referred to as an ideological constant, it is therefore important to understand what an ideological constant is. This is a term that was first used by Samuel Huntington in his book *The Soldier and the State*. Huntington makes an argument for American Liberalism as an “ideological constant.” Huntington argues that liberalism has always been the dominant ideology in America.<sup>9</sup> Huntington tends to suggest that all of the political controversies in American history have been simply disputes between different varieties of liberalism. Huntington argues that there has never been a genuine, American conservative ideology (with two exceptions),<sup>10</sup> to counter balance this overarching idea of liberalism. Huntington’s term “ideological constant” can also be applied to the American belief or tradition<sup>11</sup> of “American exceptionalism”. “American exceptionalism” is in fact another example of an ideological constant in American political history.

There is no generally accepted definition of “American exceptionalism.” Rather, it is best understood as a way of thinking. “American exceptionalism” embodies the notion that the U.S.A. is unique and in some ways superior, to other nations. American historian Robert Beisner described in his book *From the Old Diplomacy to the New* as the belief that the American people felt that they were not merely to inhabit the earth but rather create a free nation and a way of life better than any other in history.<sup>12</sup> In his paper “American Exceptionalism: Essential Context for National Security Strategy Development” Lieutenant Colonel David McNevin quotes author John Steinbeck when he notes that “We talk about the American way of life as though it involved the ground rules for the governance of heaven.”<sup>13</sup> McNevin termed it the “American character.”<sup>14</sup>

McNevin points out that the “main ideas underpinning each traditional theory reflect seminal aspects of American national character which have contributed in fundamental ways toward U.S. foreign policy and national security strategy development.”<sup>15</sup> McNevin, like many others, feels that the term American character is simply another way of labeling “American exceptionalism.”<sup>16</sup> Some, like historian Siobhan McEvoy-Levy in her book *American Exceptionalism and US Foreign Policy*, argue that “American exceptionalism” is the basis for many ideas and strategies or policies that emanate from this nation. McEvoy-Levy actually calls “American exceptionalism” a “Para-ideological umbrella beneath which extend such related concepts and phrases as ‘manifest destiny’, ‘city on the hill’, ‘American dream’, and ‘new world order’.”<sup>17</sup> America champions the cause of liberal and democratic values and believes that these values should apply to all men and all nations. Americans tend to believe that human rights (as we define them) and liberty are universal, and should be embraced by all nations and governments. Drew and Snow observe that many people believe American liberal democratic, capitalist ideology is universally applicable and that all countries should adopt this view.<sup>18</sup> “American exceptionalism” allows Americans to view themselves as an example to other nations: what they could and should aspire to be. Americans have historically, attempted to persuade and even coerce other nations to adopt ideals and principles consistent with U.S. beliefs. McEvoy-Levy quotes Richard Hofstadter when he observes that “Americans do not embrace ideologies because America is an ideology.”<sup>19</sup>

All of the above definitions address certain ideas and values that set America apart from all other nations. These ideas and values summarize what has been described as the American way of life. These values and concepts have included freedom, egalitarianism, individualism, populism, and laissez-faire.<sup>20</sup> At times, these ideas and values have encompassed natural and

human rights, democracy, republicanism, and constitutional government. It is these ideas and values that have historically driven, and continue to drive, U.S. grand strategy under the broader concept of “American exceptionalism.”

This idea of “American exceptionalism” originated with the early Puritan colonists. The Puritans brought with them a sense of spiritual and moral superiority that later culminated with the enlightenment period liberal tradition of John Locke. These principles then went on to become a driving force and influence on the founding era of the American Republic. Central to the Enlightenment thought was the concept of human reason as a way to view the world around us. Reason was also viewed as the primary source of legitimate authority. Moral, social, and political reform aspired to greater individual rights and liberties. Themes such as self-governance, natural law, freedom of religion, and natural rights were prevalent. It was a time for thinkers to move away from the traditional concepts of politics and society.

Historians and others have identified different types or strands of American exceptionalism. In his book *Promised Land Crusader State* historian Walter McDougall discusses some of these demographic, political, and spiritual strands.<sup>21</sup> The first is demographic. Americans see themselves as being different as a nation made up of, and founded by, immigrants from a multitude of nations. Americans tend to see themselves as having searched out something better than their countries of origin offered. In this sense they have taken all their differences in culture, language, and beliefs to set themselves apart from the rest of the world thus making them unique. Americans are unique because they are all different. America was exceptional in its tolerance of diversity. Coincident with the demographic is the geographic aspect. When the American Republic was founded, the country was still largely open and unexplored, which Americans equated with a special opportunity. America was able to distance itself from Europe,

and what many considered to be the old or corrupt ways. This reinforced Americans' belief that they were different, able to start something new and better.

A second type of "American exceptionalism" is spiritual. Many of the original colonists were in fact specifically seeking religious freedom. The Puritans felt that they were a chosen people blessed by God. On numerous occasions the colonists invoked God's blessing on the American cause of "civil and religious liberty."<sup>22</sup> With this in mind early settlers set out to provide an example to the world, and even after the decline of Puritanism, America was left with the legacy of being a spiritual and religious example to others.<sup>23</sup> This spiritual aspect of American thought helped sow the seeds of the political idealism often associated with "American exceptionalism".

The third type or strand of "American exceptionalism" identified by McDougall and others is the tradition of political thought which has been heavily influenced by, and intermingled, with the nation's spiritual traditions. Armed with the Enlightenment ideas and Locke's theories of self government, the Americans took full advantage of their isolation from Europe to think about and establish new forms of government. Using the principles derived from John Locke's ideas, Americans became accustomed to running their own affairs.<sup>24</sup> While all of these are considered strands of exceptionalism this paper will limit itself mostly to the spiritual and political concepts in relation to U.S. grand strategy. The idea that America should remain apart from the old political ways and that America will become a moral, spiritual, and political example to others. These themes have been historically present in U.S. grand strategy. It should be noted that these three strands are not mutually exclusive nor are they all inclusive. The influence on U.S. grand strategy of "American exceptionalism" seems, historically, to come back a recurring theme of idealism versus the concept of realism. This conflict between idealism and realism would

continue to plague “American exceptionalism” and its role in grand strategy throughout the history of the United States beginning with the Puritans leading up to the American Revolution.

When discussing the roots of exceptionalism in America it is appropriate to start at the beginning and in the case of America that is with the New England Puritans. The Puritans were instrumental in forging the spiritual and moral aspect to “American exceptionalism”. The Puritan influence and Enlightenment thought resulted in what McEvoy-Levy called “the thinking that the American mission to remake the world in its image was justified not just by God but by reason and in the cause of progress and human perfectibility.”<sup>25</sup> It was with this in mind that the early Puritans set out on their mission blessed with the backing of God. This mission was to strike forth and create a new society based on moral righteousness and to set the example for all others to follow. As early as 1630 Massachusetts Governor John Winthrop described the Puritan mission to become a moral role model for the world when he said “For we must Consider that wee shall be as a Citty upon a Hill, the eies of all people are upon us.”<sup>26</sup> After discussing the roots of “American exceptionalism” it is important to examine examples of when and how this ideological constant has affected U.S. grand strategy. The earliest examples date back to this country’s origins with the American Revolution.

Several factors and circumstances culminated to bring about the American Revolution. It was the combination of a people who felt oppressed by a government that they were so far geographically separated from as well as the sense of purpose they felt thrust upon them from God. This in combination with ideas and thinking of John Locke and the Enlightenment all contributed to the idea of “American exceptionalism” and in turn the American quest for independence. These European ideas of enlightenment combined with American assumptions developed into a special American approach to foreign policy and grand strategy.<sup>27</sup>

Perhaps the greatest example of the influence of “American exceptionalism” on U.S. grand strategy and the revolution is Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense*. It was this pamphlet that rallied real support from the American citizens for independence. In *Common Sense* Paine reveals that the perfect form of government should in fact be a republic. In a republic all the power comes from the people themselves. Paine felt it was the duty of America to break away from Europe and the old world and ‘begin the world over again.’<sup>28</sup> If one is to accept Thomas Paine’s pamphlet representative of the common thinking then it becomes hard to dispute that American independence is in fact rooted in the principles of “American exceptionalism.”

Paine’s *Common Sense* not only advocated independence from England but also renunciation of all political alliances. It should be noted that in the context of the times an alliance was understood to represent cooperation in the political sphere.<sup>29</sup> The goal was to avoid dependence on any other country. There was of course also the American’s desire to distance themselves from any future European wars like the Seven Years War. Gilbert quotes John Adams in 1776 as saying “the business of America with Europe was commerce, not politics or war.”<sup>30</sup> This once again pitted the idea of “American exceptionalism” and idealism with the reality of having to deal with other nations and the world of power politics. “American idealism” and exceptionalism represented the founding fathers’ desire for a Republic that supposedly eschewed the Machiavellian politics of Europe. They desired a country that was different and better making war only in self defense and our dealings with other nations being open, peaceful, and honest.<sup>31</sup> This notion would strongly influence early U.S. grand strategy both during and following the revolution.

Despite the fact that it seemed to change later on, initially it seems quite clear that the revolutionary Americans had no desire to reform the world in the name of human rights or self



determination. Despite their desire as expressed by Thomas Paine to start the world over again they intended to do so actively but rather to set the example to other nations. The founding fathers, much like the Puritans, felt that the exceptional calling of America was to do nothing. Instead they felt America's global mission was to spread republicanism and moralism by example.<sup>32</sup>

This idea of "American exceptionalism" and grand strategy, standing apart from the corrupt ways of Europe, is best exemplified in the Model Treaty in 1776. The Model Treaty is referred to by McDougall as the initial act of U.S. foreign policy or strategy.<sup>33</sup> The continental Congress recognized that in order to win its conflict with England, and thus its independence, they required foreign assistance. The target nation was France. The congress desired no military or political connection or entanglements. Instead they felt that the key was commerce and trade with other nations that would lead to recognition and success. They sought to gain economic assistance from France through trade without inadvertently becoming dependent on France and possibly pawns of the French. In the end the treaty was in fact quietly put aside. Once again it was the conflict between the idealism of American exceptionalism and the realism of functioning in the world of power politics. The American Revolution was indeed rooted in and influenced by the principles of "American exceptionalism" resulting in what the founding fathers determined to be the perfect combination of ideals and principles of a true republic. After the revolution, when faced with the realities of having to deal with the other nations of the world the founding fathers had to struggle and adapt their grand strategy with that compromise between exceptionalism or idealism and realism. How did "American exceptionalism" influence U.S. grand strategy during the post revolutionary period? Thomas Jefferson is probably the best place

to start in order to see how his version of “American exceptionalism” would guide U.S. grand strategy.

In his inaugural address in 1801 Jefferson echoed Washington’s warning of entangling alliances. Despite his idealistic tendencies, even Jefferson had to acknowledge the reality of national interests.<sup>34</sup> This is not to say that America was not in fact guided by the idea of exceptionalism. According to McDougall, Jefferson’s version of “American exceptionalism” was defined by what America was at home. Grand strategy existed to defend rather than define America.<sup>35</sup> Jefferson felt instead that we could and should avoid entangling political alliances with other nations except when liberty was at risk.

Jefferson’s views were demonstrated quite well in the realm of diplomacy, specifically during the debate to send American diplomats abroad. In 1792 several diplomatic nominations had been submitted to the Senate by Washington. Jefferson felt diplomats should only be sent to countries where there were similar interests mostly in the world of commerce.<sup>36</sup> Even then Jefferson felt that these should remain very low key and low visibility posts. His intent was to leave a very light “footprint”. Jefferson was in a sense advocating an “a-diplomatic system”<sup>37</sup> where he would engage in limited commerce and diplomacy while still setting an example to other nations with the ideals and principals of America.

This is not to say that the realism of the outside world did not interfere and force Jefferson to acknowledge that “American exceptionalism” alone would protect and allow the young republic to flourish. When push came to shove the liberty and human rights of the Enlightenment principles needed to be protected. Jefferson recognized that the world intruded on America whether America liked it or not.<sup>38</sup> One example of this is when he dispatched the

Navy and Marines to Tripoli to combat the Barbary pirates. According to McDougall Jefferson very much wanted to practice a new type of idealistic diplomacy based on this idea of American exceptionalism but in the end bowed to reality. McDougall quotes Jefferson as saying “strangely combined idealism, even utopianism, with cynical craft.”<sup>39</sup> Ultimately Jefferson allowed the idealism of “American exceptionalism” to influence his grand strategy but recognized once again that it was not always possible to avoid power politics. His idea of grand strategy was to exist as a moral guidepost to the rest of the world and exemplify the ideas of the Enlightenment. He did not intend to force the republican ideas of democracy on others because he recognized that establishing democracy abroad was difficult if not outright dangerous. The French revolution was a fine example of this. Jefferson originally gave support and saw great potential for the revolution until it degenerated into massive bloodshed and oppressive tyranny.<sup>40</sup> Another example of America as a nation clinging to the notion of American exceptionalism influencing U.S. grand strategy with its idealism in the face of realism and the external world of power politics.

This idealism was sometimes stronger than other times depending on domestic politics and economic interests.<sup>41</sup> Even though the level of idealism at times changed or that it was sometimes in conflict with realism did not restrain the consistent feeling of American Exceptionalism. As time progresses from the Jefferson administration the concept of American exceptionalism tends to slowly expand from existing just as an example to the world to attempting to according to McEvoy-Levy “remodeling the world according to American ideals”<sup>42</sup> The progression of “American exceptionalism”, and its affect on U.S. grand strategy, as setting an example to more direct action is best exemplified by the administration of Woodrow Wilson.

As with many examples of grand strategy influenced by “American exceptionalism”, Wilson’s grand strategy had to deal with the conflict between idealism and realism. His grand strategy in some regards was rooted in realism hidden behind the idealism of “American exceptionalism”. One of the first principles of Wilsonian grand strategy was that democracies are more stable and less of a threat to the United States. They are less likely to move away from popular political ideals even if they were to fail.<sup>43</sup> So despite the idealistic goals of making other countries democratic for their own good and self improvement there are also realist considerations, given that a democracy poses less of a threat to other democratic nations. Unfortunately along with this are the less justifiable cases of supporting some nations who espouse exactly the opposite of American ideals.

President Woodrow Wilson believed strongly in creating a new international system, with institutions such as the League of Nations, based on ideals embraced by most Americans. In this sense Wilson’s version of “American exceptionalism” in the form of idealism is probably the closest to what is considered classic liberalism. Wilson interpreted the concept of “America exceptionalism” in terms of setting a moral example for other nations, and went forth into the world to spread American ideals and values. This moral commitment had an enormous influence on Wilson’s grand strategy. During Wilson’s administration force was directly connected to the grand strategy with military expeditions into Mexico twice, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and of course WW I. The grand strategy of Wilson was to use force to “promote American ideology, enforce international law, encourage international cooperation, and effect collective security.”<sup>44</sup> In his book, *Uses of Force and Wilsonian Foreign Policy* historian Frederick S. Calhoun quotes Wilson saying in 1916 “If I cannot retain my moral influence over a man except by occasionally knocking him down...then for the sake of his soul I have got occasionally to knock him down.”<sup>45</sup>

Under Wilson grand strategy and the use of force was no longer just in the cause of vital national interests and defense of American values but also fundamental to the principles of a righteous morality. Woodrow Wilson was ready to spread democracy to the world.

One such example where the idea of “American exceptionalism” influenced Wilson’s grand strategy was the 1915 military intervention in Haiti. Wilson’s Haitian intervention was really based on a two point grand strategy. He wanted to teach the Haitians how to be a democratic self-governed people like the United States and to protect them from themselves.<sup>46</sup> In reality there were also other factors that led to the U.S. intervention such as geopolitical and financial. Stability and a strong U.S. influence in Haiti dictated a tactical advantage to the United States in regards to the Panama Canal. Wilson was also concerned with the growing financial interests of other nations in Haiti such as Germany and France. The Haiti intervention is a clear example of grand strategy influenced by “American exceptionalism” in the form of idealism and the realism of U.S. security. In the idealistic cause Wilson wished the Haitians to embrace and enjoy the democratic values that so many Americans had. In the realist part of his grand strategy Wilson had political and military concerns especially due to Haiti’s geographic location relative to the Panama Canal.

A second and perhaps better known example of grand strategy in the Wilson administration and “American exceptionalism” is World War I. At the outset of the war Wilson was determined to stay neutral and falling back on idealism to help the rest of the world regain peace. Frederick Calhoun quotes Wilson saying “we are trying to preserve the foundations upon which peace can be rebuilt.”<sup>47</sup> Wilson’s grand strategy was to maintain neutrality and mediate a peace settlement that might culminate in a world organization like the League of Nations. The United States and Wilson believed the time had come for America to assume an active leadership in world affairs.<sup>48</sup>

Even after U.S. entry into the war, Wilson insisted on remaining politically independent from America's co-belligerents going as far as to say the USA was "associated" not "allied" with them. Ultimately, Wilson felt America had won the war and saved Britain and France. According to Gilbert, Wilson had transformed an imbalance of power and war caused by the old alliance system and realpolitik into an ideological crusade. According to Calhoun Wilson felt that he was giving many people of the world the right to self-determination protected by a new international system which would rely on collective action to maintain the peace. At the end of the war America was at its zenith militarily, economically, and politically. The Allied powers were exhausted and indebted to the U.S.<sup>49</sup> These circumstances allowed Wilson to negotiate the terms of the armistice with little reference to the Allies.<sup>50</sup> Wilson was pleased with the role that America had played in bringing peace to the world and opened the door to a new world loosely based on American principles and ideals. Wilson was determined to write a peace in Paris that implemented his fourteen points.

Wilson best exemplifies taking the idea of American values and enforcing them on other nations, which can be seen as very problematic. This idea of imposing democracy on others has continued to present day with some very unpopular responses and effects. This is often seen as hypocritical based on who America chooses to influence or coerce. This again leads us back to the conflict between realism and idealism. "American exceptionalism" has grown from being a moral compass, or example, to the rest of the world and slowly transitioning to the idea of exporting the ideas of America concerning moral and political preference. This is often done under the guise of idealism but sometimes rooted in pure realism as seen with the Cold War era. This may more accurately be described as the distinction between two versions of "American exceptionalism", "American Mission" and "Manifest Destiny".

It was after the Second World War that the USA evolved from a continental to a truly global power. Grand strategy evolved as well. America had gone from using “American exceptionalism” to preserve America’s ideals, to attempting to reorganize the world in America’s image. It was during the cold war that another ideology, in the form of communism, seemed to come into direct confrontation with the ideals of America in a public way. With this challenge came a need to revisit grand strategy. The old corrupt political practices and alliance system in Europe that Americans had sought to rebel against and distance themselves from had been replaced with the Soviet Union and communism as the antithesis to the idealism of “American exceptionalism.” In fact now that the U.S. was a super power the idea of “American exceptionalism” actually extended to the Westernized nations of Europe.<sup>51</sup> Many of the Western Europe countries shared the ideals of human rights and self governance and shared in the struggle against communism with the United States through organizations such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). So in many ways it appeared that they too were trying to impose those ideals and values on other nations.

One example of the conflict between “American exceptionalism” in the form of idealism and realism was with President Truman’s grand strategy. In 1947 Great Britain was no longer able to economically support Turkey and Greece. The fear, of course, was that the Soviets would take their place and spread communism to those countries. In response Truman spoke of the United State’s responsibility to support free peoples who were resisting subjugation by communist pressures. Truman felt and expressed that only the U.S. was up to the task at hand.<sup>52</sup> There were critics on all sides of this plan, many like banker and presidential financial advisor James Warburg felt that the policy was too broad and sounded as if America was trying to again reshape the world in its image. McDougall quotes Warburg as saying: “We are willing to

become citizens of the world, but only if the world becomes an extension of the United States.”<sup>53</sup>

This became a recurring theme throughout the cold war era under many administrations.

Truman ultimately believed that democracy and the democratic ideals were in fact a spiritual force whereas communism was materialistic and fanatic. He is quoted by McDougall as saying that “God has created us and brought to our present position of power and strength for some great purpose.”<sup>54</sup> Truman was in fact harking back to the same idealism of “American exceptionalism” as expressed by the Puritans and the likes of Woodrow Wilson.

During the cold war “American exceptionalism” once again took on almost a dual role in influencing grand strategy. During the cold war the predominate grand strategy was based on National Security Council Paper 68 (NSC 68). Published in 1950 it detailed America’s strategy to contain and push back the Soviet Union and communism.<sup>55</sup> “American exceptionalism” seemed to drive both realist and idealist grand strategy and policy. Many argue that “American exceptionalism” was actually used to legitimize the cold war and disguise conflicts rooted in the realist grand strategy of state security as idealistic gestures of spreading democracy and human rights. In some sense it was similar to the strategy employed by Wilson that combined both realist and idealist principles. Arguably Presidents Reagan and Wilson are considered to be very similar in their grand strategy. Even at the end of the cold war President George H. W. Bush talked vaguely about a new world order similar to Wilson’s thoughts on what he envisioned for the future. This dual influence of “American exceptionalism” is probably best illustrated by the many interventions around the world during the cold war in the name of containing communism based on the idea that America has a responsibility to foster and protect freedom at home and abroad.



The concept of bringing freedom and democracy to the rest of the world seemed to continue influencing grand strategy throughout the cold war under all administrations eventually culminating in the Reagan administration grand strategy. The Reagan grand strategy may best be described as an ideological offensive against communism. This strategy involved what some would describe as limited and sometimes proxy wars through the support and aid to what Reagan described as “freedom fighters” such as Nicaraguan Contras, the Polish Solidarity movement and of course the Afghan Mujaheddin.<sup>56</sup> Many critics felt that it was “American exceptionalism” being used by Reagan to disguise these conflicts as a crusade for democracy. There were also critics sometimes labeled “neo isolationists”, who felt that events in places like Nicaragua did not in reality pose a threat to U.S. national security.

During the cold war the idea of “American exceptionalism” was looked at in terms of spreading democracy in the name of idealism. As always there was the conflict between genuine idealism and using idealism to disguise principles of realism. In the cold war these principles of realism were the containment and defeat of communism for state political and physical security. When looking at current grand strategy specifically in the George W Bush administration this idea of exceptionalism is once again present. Much like the threat of old world Europe and power politics was replaced by the threat of communism, communism is now replaced by the threat of non state actors and terrorism. The U.S. is now using the spread of American ideology as way of combating non state actors and terrorism. This is currently very self-evident, specifically with the situation in both Iraq and Afghanistan.

Perhaps the best example of this grand strategy under Bush is Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF). While America went to Iraq with the intent to dispose of suspected weapons of mass destruction and Iraqi failure to abide by U.N. mandates, the mission has become promoting

democracy in the way of American traditions The idea that Iraq under Saddam Hussein actually posed any real threat to the security of the United States is highly debatable. If one accepts the premise that without the weapons of mass destruction Iraq was not a threat to the United States there is no reason to be in Iraq based on the principles of realist politics and state security. This same argument could be made against terrorism in general. Terrorism has not shown itself to be a threat to the overall security and sovereignty of the United States. So in these two situations it is difficult to disguise the spread of American ideals as protection of the state. What is left is the idea of spreading American values in the truest sense of “American exceptionalism.” In *Power and Superpower Global Leadership and Exceptionalism in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, political scientist David P. Forsythe argues that George W. Bush brought with him that traditional idea of “American exceptionalism” that the U.S. is divinely blessed to spread its values to the rest of the world.<sup>57</sup>

The Bush grand strategy between 2001 and 2006 in many ways reflected the first term of Reagan. At some point there was debate in the administration about the role of “American exceptionalism” amongst key members of the administration. Vice President Dick Cheney and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld felt that “American Exceptionalism” was best expressed in terms of power and realist policies while Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz believed in “neocon” principles of combining power with the expanding of freedom and democracy.<sup>58</sup> The Bush administration was heavily influenced by neo-conservatism. Lieutenant Colonel David T. McNevin of the Army War College talks about political philosopher Francis Fukuyama when discussing what he called the four common principles of neo-conservatism a belief in the moral authority of American application of force, universality of human liberty, skepticism of international organizations, and social engineering executed on a grand scale by

government. Fukuyama goes even further to say that the emphasis has become stuck on the “transformational potential of American military power.”<sup>59</sup> This concept of using American military force to transform other nations towards democracy is rooted in the concept of “American exceptionalism”.

These concepts all contributed to the idea of Operation Iraqi Freedom. Drew and Snow summarize the George W. Bush grand strategy as the first time that these two concepts, Unilateralism and spreading democracy through military power, have been used together. The idea of acting alone (Unilateralism) and promoting democratic order through the use of power what Drew and Snow refer to as evangelism is really just another form of “American exceptionalism”.<sup>60</sup>

How effective is spreading democracy to combat terrorism? More importantly should this be done by force and intervention? Political scientist Michael McFaul in *Power and Superpower Global Leadership and Exceptionalism in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* states that “promoting democracy through military intervention has rarely worked in history.”<sup>61</sup> McFaul offers examples like the revolutions in Kyrgyzstan and Ukraine. Kyrgyzstan is close to becoming a failed state and Ukraine’s Prime minister is the same who attempted to rig elections in 2004.<sup>62</sup> In both Iraq and Afghanistan the intent was to focus on security threats to America and other “Western” countries. However, over time the mission seemed to change to promoting democracy.<sup>63</sup> In either case, the United States has been unsuccessful thus far. Instead of democracy in Iraq there is a civil war and insurgency. Afghanistan’s democracy is faring only slightly better continually on the verge of regime collapse and renewed civil war.<sup>64</sup> There are many theories as to why America has failed. There is much to be said for trying to promote democracy to a country or people who may not want a democracy or may not be ready for democracy. With rare

exceptions most democracies are formed internally as opposed to being imposed from external forces. Furthermore the success of installing a democracy by military means is also rare as evidenced by countries such as Haiti, Kosovo, and Bosnia.<sup>65</sup>

#### **Section 4: “American exceptionalism” and the future of U.S. grand strategy/Conclusion**

Present grand strategy has continued to contain and be influenced by the idea of “American exceptionalism”. The grand strategy of George W. Bush thus far has proved to be unsuccessful if, not actually having done more harm than good. There is a strong feeling among many who feel that America is worse off in the world because of this grand strategy. Whether it is in the “eyes” of the world or the domestic population of America U.S. grand strategy has been constrained by “American exceptionalism”. This seems to be a new twist in that unlike conflict between idealism and realism in past administrations the current “neo-cons” seem to actually embrace the concept of openly combining the two. They have shown that they have no problem with using American military force to spread American ideals openly in the name of spreading democracy as well as providing for the security of the United States. This is evident with both Iraq and Afghanistan. So the question is how will this affect the future of U.S. grand strategy and if and how it will be influenced by and constrained by this continuing idea of idealism through “American exceptionalism”.

“American exceptionalism” has been present and has influenced U.S. grand strategy from the Puritans up to and including the present grand strategy. “American exceptionalism” was born out of the Enlightenment principles of rationalism and the idea that God had blessed America with a spiritual principle of higher morality and the mission to spread that morality. It began as an idea that America could set itself apart as an example to other peoples and nations

without becoming entangled with these other nations and the world of corrupt moral and political practices. This idea soon came into conflict with the principles of political realism, the idea that America would in fact have to interact with the rest of the world and could not entirely remove themselves from the practices of realpolitik. Starting slowly with the grand strategy of Jefferson the idea of standing apart as a moral compass to others slowly transformed to going out and actively spreading the principles and values of “American exceptionalism”, many times through the use of military intervention and force. Leaving one with question posed by McDougall when he asks if Americans really want a grand strategy based on a policy of moral righteousness over actual national interests, or do Americans feel that a given policy or grand strategy is moral because it is in our national interests?<sup>66</sup> Based on the historical examples a strong case is made for the latter.

This has continued on and off through the grand strategy of the United States to the present. The threat of power politics was eventually replaced with the threat of communism and later the threat of terrorism. Yet “American exceptionalism” has remained throughout and continued to influence U.S. grand strategy. Over time “American exceptionalism” has influenced grand strategy in many different forms. Mostly “American exceptionalism” and idealism seem to have been used to disguise what many would consider realism and the idea protecting America’s interests abroad.

Given the history of “American exceptionalism” and its influence and many times constraint of U.S. grand strategy should be assumed and without a radical shift in thinking and theory “American exceptionalism” will continue to influence and constrain U.S. grand strategy. An example of this is the concept of current and future space exploration. There is much debate concerning the rules and hierarchy of space exploration. In his book, *Astropolitik Classical*

*Geopolitics in the Space Age*, political scientist Everett C. Dolman writes: “As the great liberal democracy of its time, the United States is preferentially endowed to guide the whole of humanity into space, to police any misuse of that realm, and to ensure an equitable division of its spoils.”<sup>67</sup> This provides a strong indicator along with past grand strategy that “American Exceptionalism” will continue to influence and shape U.S. grand strategy.

In conclusion, it is evident that “American exceptionalism” has indeed influenced and at times constrained U.S. grand strategy in a historical perspective. It appears that this trend will continue in the future of U.S. grand strategy as evidenced by the current national policy goals and strategy. Another example is the apparent U.S. approach to space perhaps the last new physical domain in which nations will interact. The idea “American exceptionalism” has historically not been confined to any one party or International Relations theory rather existed across the spectrum. That trend continues today in discussions concerning the future role of American exceptionalism” and idealism on U.S. grand strategy. There are many who feel America should go back to realist political precepts as opposed to the ideals of self righteous moralizing. While others who would prefer that the U.S. abandon all precepts of exceptionalism all together to almost an isolationist strategy perhaps better defined as non entanglement such as Eric Nordlinger who argued according to McDougall that “going abroad to insure America’s security is unnecessary.”<sup>68</sup>

In the end it will be the realist grand strategy, probably continued being disguised as idealism that will prevail. Containment strategy is a good example. There will always be debate but a grand strategy of containment appears to have halted the cold war and made America more secure. It may have been disguised by idealism but it was the realist principles that accomplished the desired end state. If “American exceptionalism” continues to influence and

constrain U.S. grand strategy it will have negative effects on America as a whole. Based again on the historical examples idealism alone has never been successful in achieving the goals of U.S. grand strategy and has at times hurt them. As evidenced by the execution of current grand strategy abroad in Iraq and the war on terror which has substantially damaged the world image of America and arguably makes American security weaker and America more of a target. The United States should pull back some when it comes to the idea of spreading American ideals and do a better job of determining what poses a real threat to America. The U.S. will become less of a target and become agreeable to those countries that wish to cooperate with us. Otherwise “American exceptionalism” will continue to constrain U.S. grand strategy.

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<sup>1</sup> Drew and Snow, *Making Twenty-First-Century Strategy An Introduction to Modern national Security Processes and Problems*, 53

<sup>2</sup> Huntington, *The Soldier And The State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations*, 143

<sup>3</sup> Drew and Snow, *Making Twenty-First-Century Strategy An Introduction to Modern national Security Processes and Problems*, 13

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 14

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 17

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 50

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 72

<sup>9</sup> Huntington, *The Soldier And The State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations*, 143

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 145

<sup>11</sup> Beisner, *From the Old Diplomacy to the New*, 9

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> McNevin, *American Exceptionalism: Essential Context For National Security Strategy Development*, 9

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 7

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 4

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 7

<sup>17</sup> McEvoy-Levy, *American Exceptionalism and US Foreign Policy Public Diplomacy at the End of the Cold War*, 23

<sup>18</sup> Drew and Snow, *Making Twenty-First-Century Strategy An Introduction to Modern national Security Processes and Problems*, 72

<sup>19</sup> McEvoy-Levy, *American Exceptionalism and US Foreign Policy Public Diplomacy at the End of the Cold War*, 24

<sup>20</sup> Lipset, *American Exceptionalism: a Double-Edged Sword*, 19

<sup>21</sup> McDougall, *Promised Land, Crusader State The American Encounter with the World Since 1776*, 16

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 17

<sup>23</sup> McEvoy-Levy, *American Exceptionalism and US Foreign Policy Public Diplomacy at the End of the Cold War*, 24

<sup>24</sup> McDougall, *Promised Land, Crusader State The American Encounter with the World Since 1776*, 16

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> McDougall, *Promised Land, Crusader State The American Encounter with the World Since 1776*, 17



- <sup>27</sup> Gilbert, *To the Farewell Address*, 16
- <sup>28</sup> McDougall, *Promised Land, Crusader State The American Encounter with the World Since 1776*, 19
- <sup>29</sup> Gilbert, *To the Farewell Address*, 45
- <sup>30</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>31</sup> McDougall, *Promised Land, Crusader State The American Encounter with the World Since 1776*, 23-24
- <sup>32</sup> Ibid., 20
- <sup>33</sup> Ibid., 24
- <sup>34</sup> McDougall, *Promised Land, Crusader State The American Encounter with the World Since 1776*, 37
- <sup>35</sup> Ibid., 37
- <sup>36</sup> Gilbert, *To the Farewell Address*, 73
- <sup>37</sup> Ibid., 73
- <sup>38</sup> Meade, *Special Providence American Foreign Policy And How It Changed The World*, 186
- <sup>39</sup> McDougall, *Promised Land, Crusader State The American Encounter with the World Since 1776*, 33
- <sup>40</sup> Meade, *Special Providence American Foreign Policy And How It Changed The World*, 182
- <sup>41</sup> Varg, *Foreign Policies of the Founding Fathers*, 83
- <sup>42</sup> McEvoy-Levy, *American Exceptionalism and US Foreign Policy Public Diplomacy at the End of the Cold War*, 24
- <sup>43</sup> Ibid., 162
- <sup>44</sup> Calhoun, *Uses of Force and Wilsonian Foreign Policy*, 1
- <sup>45</sup> Ibid., 5
- <sup>46</sup> Ibid., 20
- <sup>47</sup> Ibid., 99
- <sup>48</sup> Ibid., 102
- <sup>49</sup> Ibid., 123
- <sup>50</sup> Ibid
- <sup>51</sup> Ibid., 29
- <sup>52</sup> McDougall, *Promised Land, Crusader State The American Encounter with the World Since 1776* , 163
- <sup>53</sup> Ibid., 164
- <sup>54</sup> Ibid., 168
- <sup>55</sup> Ibid., 26

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 171

<sup>57</sup> Forsythe, *Power and Superpower Global Leadership and Exceptionalism in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, 71

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 76

<sup>59</sup> McNevin, *American Exceptionalism: Essential Context For National Security Strategy Development*, 4

<sup>60</sup> Drew and Snow, *Making Twenty-First-Century Strategy An Introduction to Modern national Security Processes and Problems*, xiii

<sup>61</sup> McFaul, *Power and Superpower Global Leadership and Exceptionalism in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, 209

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 211

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 209

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 221

<sup>66</sup> McDougall, *Promised Land, Crusader State The American Encounter with the World Since 1776*, 207

<sup>67</sup> Dolman, *Atropolitik Classical Geopolitics in the Space Age*, 181

<sup>68</sup> McDougall, *Promised Land, Crusader State The American Encounter with the World Since 1776*, 201

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